Telepractice and Stuttering Therapy
Part 1: Getting Started

Practical Tip for Clinics/Practices:

Check the regulations!
Be aware that billing codes, licensing requirements, and insurance coverage/third-party payment options may differ for telepractice compared to in-person therapy, so be sure to check on those details before you start.

Get permission from your clients
Remember that you’ll need to get approval from your clients to interact with them online. Your organization probably already has privacy policies that explain how you will maintain client confidentiality. You can use these or expand them to cover telepractice. Remember that this might be new for your clients, too, so be sure to explain to them how you will ensure that they are protected even when you treat them via the Internet.

Secure a (secure) platform
One of the most important steps in implementing telepractice is to use a secure videoconference platform. There are many available, and you can easily find information on the Internet about which platforms are allowable for use in your district or state. Be sure that they are HIPAA- and FERPA-compliant, as appropriate for your clients and the nature of your practice.

Think about the features
Some online platforms have advanced features, such as screen-sharing, recording, chats, multiple windows, and whiteboards, that can help you make your therapy more interactive. You might not need these as you are first starting, but over time you will find ways to increase your client’s (and your own) engagement in therapy through the use of these tools.

Invest in a good Internet connection
Nothing is more frustrating than dropped frames or frozen images when you are engaged in telepractice. (This is particularly an issue for those of us who work with people who stutter!) It is worth it to pay for fast Internet services, so that you and your clients can interact as naturally as possible. No matter what you do, your online interactions won’t be exactly the same as face-to-face conversation, but you can get close if your Internet connection is up to it.

Headphones: Better is really better
Although many people can do videoconferencing just fine with regular ear buds, SLPs are special. We really need to hear our clients clearly—and they need to hear us. There really is a difference in high-quality headphones. The technology is so good these days that you don’t have to break the bank, but definitely step up from the earbuds that came with your phone.
Familiarize yourself with the software before trying it with your clients

Call a friend or family member and play around with the various features in your online platform before you try to use them with your clients. You don’t want to introduce any additional confusion for your clients. Remember, this is probably the first time for them to use this type of technology. The more you practice, the more prepared you will be to help them troubleshoot when they run into trouble.

You don’t really need much technical know-how!

Modern telepractice systems take care of all of the details for you. Pick a good one, and it will provide you with a solid platform for providing your therapy that will allow you to focus on your client, not the technology. The less computer-savvy you are, the more important it is to pick a full-service platform. You don’t want to spend your time trying to figure out the computer when what you need to be doing is helping your clients.

Start each new client with a tour

In fact, it can be very helpful to start your first session with a tour of the telepractice environment. Orient your clients to what they are seeing on their screen. Explain to them what to do if the image freeze or the video is choppy. Help them find the chat window, so they can type questions to you if they are having trouble. Show them what you see on your screen. Consider preparing a “cheat sheet” for them listing procedures for starting and ending sessions, checking their audio and video signals, and how to contact you if they are stuck.

You don’t have to reinvent the wheel…

Nearly everything that you do in in-person therapy can be adapted to telepractice. There are some exceptions (particularly some that are very relevant to stuttering therapy—we address those in another practical tip). Still, most of the things that you do in the therapy room can be done via the computer: modeling, feedback, reinforcements, rewards, data collection, games, and more—all can be adapted with a bit of creativity. It might not be exactly the way that you and your clients are accustomed to, but you’ll find that there are good ways to bridge the gap, so you can rely on your existing knowledge and strategies to help your clients.

Acknowledge that some aspects of therapy will need to change

Even though you can do a really good approximation of in-person therapy via an online platform, there are indeed some aspects of therapy that will need to change. Explain this to your clients, acknowledge that you will be do everything you can to give them the best therapy possible, and work together to overcome barriers.

Rely upon your resources

Many clinicians have already paved the way. ASHA has put together a practice portal focused on telepractice: https://www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Professional-Issues/Telepractice/. Use this and other resources, such as your state licensing board and state association websites, to get accurate information about telepractice.

One of your best sources of information about telepractice and stuttering is us! Stuttering Therapy Resources will be posting more information to help you help people who stutter, so be sure to follow us on all of our social media channels and check our website often: https://www.StutteringTherapyResources.com.

Remember that YOU CAN DO IT!

Probably the most important thing to keep in mind as you approach telepractice for stuttering (or any other condition) is that you can do it. You already have the clinical skills you need; all you are doing is adapting the delivery format. Certainly, you will learn new tricks as you gain experience with the online format, but the fundamentals of stuttering therapy are the same, regardless of the delivery method.

Keeping these thoughts in mind, you will find that you can help your clients achieve their goals, whether in person or via the Internet. Whether you’re doing this by choice or by necessity, give it a try, and you may even come to appreciate some of the unique benefits that telepractice has to offer!